



CHAPTER X.

It was a charming morning, bright with sunshine, as the captain of the "Merry Maid" sighted Gibraltar; the world was three weeks older than on the eventful day when Marvel first stepped ashore. It had been three weeks of unalloyed enjoyment to her, not a shadow having darkened the days that sped all too swiftly. She was with Fulke, and she was happy. Not that she saw much of him; but she was quite content with the knowledge that he was somewhere near, and she had early learned that she was not to be a "trouble to him"—which meant that she was not to break in upon his moods when he appeared silent and distraught. And he was often so.

At Gibraltar they expected to receive any letters or papers that might have been forwarded to them; and Wriothsey, for two days before they reached it, could hardly restrain the cruel impatience with which he looked forward to the news that the society journals especially might contain. He could see the paragraphs describing how Leonie looked as an bride, each dainty detail of her wedding gown, the line of guests, the false flattering mention of the ancient groom.

It was all terrible to him, and the constant strain, the perpetual dwelling on one subject, injured him both in mind and body; he grew pale and thin, filled as he was with an undying remorse for another, until at last the pretty, laughing presence of Marvel grew insupportable to him.

Instinctively she felt this, but so vaguely that it hardly rendered her uneasy; but a desire to do something that should please him, that should win her a smile, led her to be the first to receive the post when it arrived, and to carry it to him herself. He might have thanked her, she thought, for being the one to bring him that post for which he had so long waited; but he had thought of nothing but that stupid paper. She hoped she would never see it again; she would always recollect the color of its cover.

Meantime Wriothsey, with a rapid hand turned the pages. Here, there, he looked for the dreaded announcement, but as yet saw nothing. The small society paragraphs did not mention any fashionable wedding in which her name stood prominently. He had drawn a long breath of curious relief, and had just turned a fresh page half carelessly, when a heading in large letters caught his eye:

"Sudden Death of the Duke of Dawtry." He read it three or four times, and, having mastered it—rather a trouble to him, because of the shock to his brain—he went on quietly reading the rest of the article. Only a few words of it clung to him. "On the eve of his marriage."

On the eve! She had not married him then! And now she was free! He half started from his seat, forgetting all things but that, and that he must go to her. Then memory returned in its full power—Marvel's face stood out before him, and with a groan he sank back again; then, leaning his arms upon the table, his head fell forward on them.

It was thus that Marvel found him an hour later. She had repented of her short-lived anger, and in a sweet, penitent mood had come back to him. She saw at a glance that it was the paper she had given him that was lying open on the table before her. Something in her attitude frightened her, and she came quickly to his side.

"Fulke, what is it?" she asked, nervously, laying her hand upon his shoulder. He started, and looked up, withdrawing sharply from her touch as he did so; and she saw that his face was ghastly.

"Nothing," he said, "you will not worry me now. It is nothing."

"Do not speak to me like that," she entreated, trembling. "Tell me your trouble—let me try to comfort you!"

He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. There was a terrible expression in his eyes as they rested on her.

"You mean—?" she began. She was shivering from head to foot; his manner was so strange, so wild, that she was quite unnerved. "Fulke, speak to me!"

"What have I to say—that have you to hear—except that I would I had never seen you!" There was the bitter savagery of truth in his tone; he had lost all control over himself; but, when he had dealt the blow, he felt sobered. "There—forgive me! I hardly know what I say. I told you to go," he said, and he waited, knowing yet hardly caring for her pain, so great was his own.

She paused for a moment, as if turned to stone, and then went slowly out of the room.

She felt stunned, terrified; she crept slowly up the stairs to the study where the salt breeze blew upon her face, and in a strange, vague way created in her a desire for tears; but she repressed them, and, seeing a wicker chair on her right hand, went to it and sank down wearily among the cushions.

Her hands fell listlessly upon her lap, and she stared out seaward with hot, strained eyes, to see nothing but a limitless ocean all around her, and, above, a cloudless sky. For the first time the exquisite, smiling beauty of nature seemed to her repellent. Oh, for clouds, for rain, for tempest, for anything save this heartless brilliance! How had she offended him, that he should look like that—that fault committed, that he should say those dreadful words? He had said she was his "undoing."

There was something surely; and it was in that paper—the paper she had given him last! Oh, how unfortunate she was that hers should have been the hand to wound! She knew instinctively that he was hurt past healing; but what was it?

The next day Marvel found the paper and delicately searched it. She felt that no dishonor attached itself to her for thus endeavoring to fathom his secret; she meant only to know for certain this thing that stood between him and her. She would make no mistake; she would try fully to understand everything; that afterward she might be assured that she had done no wrong in act or thought by leaving him.

The paper was considerably crumpled on one page, as though a hand had involuntarily clutched it; and this she felt was where the mystery lay. She scanned the page hurriedly, and the large starting print of the first heading especially attracted her notice. "Sudden Death of the Duke of Dawtry." She read and reread it in silent wonderment, and then the paragraph beneath; but Mrs. Scarlett's name was not mentioned there, and she scarcely knew what to think when she had come to the end of it. She knew this, however—that the reading of that

article had caused him to look at her with eyes full of hatred; and in a sorrowful, silent way she began to ponder the best way of removing herself forever from his sight.

All through the week she sought for some excuse to offer him, but none came; and at last she determined upon telling him that she wished to return home. This was partly the truth, though to return to the old home—to her beloved Towers—was more, she thought, than she could endure; and if the marriage could be set aside, as she hoped and believed with a passionate misery that it could be, he would be the last to wish her there.

At length, one day toward evening, she summoned all her courage to her aid, and went to where he was, and, standing at some little distance from him with her folded hands tightly clasped, said, tremulously:

"Fulke, may I go home?" "What?" he said, as one thoroughly amazed. His face changed, and he regarded her with a searching scrutiny. "What is it you want?"

"To go home," she repeated, with a slight increase of nervousness this time. He said nothing for a minute or two, spent principally in thinking out her words; and then, with a half smile:

"Tired of me soon?" "Yes, I am tired," she said, in a low voice. Her head was bent, and she was twisting her wedding ring round and round her finger in a little, sad, aimless way.

"Well, what is it?" asked he, not unkindly, though some sense of disappointment was irritating him. "There is something else you want to say."

"I wish I had not married you," she said. The words came so quietly and with such calm distinctness that at first he could hardly believe his ears. Then his brow contracted.

"That is a terrible thing to say. Are you quite sure you mean it?" "Quite—quite sure," she drew closer to him. "Why should it be terrible?" she asked. "The—our marriage can be undone, can't it?"

It was impossible not to see with what overpowering anxiety she hung upon his answer. It seemed to be a matter of life or death to her—this question as to whether she would or would not have to live the rest of her life as his wife. It was scarcely a flattering thought, and he resented it sorely. And could she indeed be so foolish, so ignorant, as to have a doubt on the subject? He looked at the pale, childish face upraised to his and saw that it was indeed so; but, as he looked, he misjudged the fear in the large eyes, and failed to understand the misery that saddened the young life.

"I am afraid I must tell you something you will not like to hear," he said, very gently. "Our marriage cannot be undone. My wife you must remain until kindly death releases you from me or from you."

"How can there be such a wicked law?" It is unjust—horrible! She clasped her slender hands upon her bosom. "How am I to live," she cried, "with this weight forever on my heart?"

"You are unjust," said Wriothsey, coldly. "I did not compel you to this marriage."

"No; that is it," she said, quickly, raising her lovely, haggard eyes to his. "It was I who made you marry me; I entreated you, I begged you—oh, how could I have done it?—not to leave me behind alone; and now—now—with such a depth of misery in the young voice as struck coldly to his heart—"I am doing alone!"

Remorse grew stronger within him. A sudden awakening to the fact that he had sacrificed her to his own revenge troubled him, and, though justice had followed hard upon the heels of that deed, and his revenge had recoiled upon himself, yet he could not but see that he had done her an injury that was irreparable. How could he have thought that a child so reared and encompassed with love as she had been would rest satisfied with the barren existence he had given her?

"I cannot hear you speak like that," he said. "I am alone in fault. I have done you so great a wrong that I know not how to ask your forgiveness. You were you are, but a mere child, yet I took you at your word—I permitted you to marry a man nearly twelve years your senior! I feel I have spoiled your life."

"Is that how it seems to you?" asked she, with indescribable sadness in look and tone.

"You are too young to live alone. But, if you do not wish to go to the Towers, there is that place in Yorkshire. It is handsome and—carelessly—"picturesque," they say; and, at all events, it is well kept up and ready for you at any moment. Will it suit you better than this, I dare say," she said, calmly, and with some spirit.

"Very good. I shall telegraph to-day to Ringwood, the name of your future home, and also to my cousin, Mrs. Verulam. You know her?"

"I have met her twice." "Then you like her—every one does. I shall write to her to go up there and stay with you and see to you generally."

There was little more said between them as to this strange parting, and the arrangements connected with it were completed in a week or so. Marvel contrived to avoid him as much as possible—a matter in which he silently helped her, being in no wise desirous of seeing her—but when they did meet, it was to all outward seeming with as friendly a feeling as usual.

CHAPTER XI.

"My good child, I wish, at all events, that you would not study to be absurd! Should you or I ever have to show yourself to people; and why not sooner? You couldn't possibly have a more excellent opportunity than the present; yet you are bent on shirking it."

"That is scarcely it. It is—precisely it—in a nutshell. You haven't a solitary good excuse for your refusal to attend my dance! It is downright ungrateful of you, after all the trouble I have taken to make your story good during the past twelve months. Oh, the gentle hints I have flung abroad! I have been chanting your praises ceaselessly, and giving all sorts of pretty little reasons for your separation from your husband. I thought I would do so, and I have done so to avoid him as much as possible—A matter in which he silently helped her, being in no wise desirous of seeing her—but when they did meet, it was to all outward seeming with as friendly a feeling as usual."

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might promise me to be present on the tenth." "Dearest Cleely, if you would only not ask me!" said Marvel, in a soft, distressed tone.

She came out from behind the lace curtains of the window, where she had been sitting, to glance imploringly at Mrs. Verulam; and, as she now stood, with the glory of the autumn sunshine shining upon her, it was marvelous to mark the change that a bare year had wrought in her. Then she was a child; now she was a woman—a girlish creature still, but with a face so earnest, so intelligent, so beautiful in the strictest sense of that word, that it was an exquisite pleasure even to look upon her.

She had gone straight to Ringwood, according to her husband's desire, where Mrs. Verulam had received her, having indeed thrown over several engagements to do so. She was charmed with the pretty, desolate little bride—the "poor little returned coo," as she called her—and, as she learned to like her better and better, indignant with Wriothsey because of his treatment of her. She had made a pretty accurate guess of how matters stood from the beginning; and a little judicious questioning had extracted enough from Marvel to make her half-knowledge a whole. She wrote Wriothsey a long letter that was a perfect masterpiece of elegant vituperation, and took to petting Marvel as though she were an invalid in a very advanced stage.

She was now seriously ambitious to carry a point to which she had almost pledged herself. When in town, she had spoken so much of Lady Wriothsey's personal charms and so mysteriously of her separation from her husband that everyone was eagerly desirous of being made more intimately acquainted with her. Mrs. Verulam had asked down a good many for the twelfth—her brother-in-law, Lord Verulam, who was an enthusiastic sportsman, and his wife among them—and she had half promised them that this Marvel of Marvels should be one of the guests. All were to arrive about the ninth, and, as there was occasion to entertain a newly made bride, Mrs. Verulam had arranged to give a ball on the tenth. This would give the sportsmen the whole of the eleventh on which to rest, and after that the Deluge—for the birds. But just now her program was a little spoiled because of the fact that Marvel had steadily declined to show herself either at the dance or in the house during the stay of her party. Finally, by dint of coaxing, she managed to obtain Marvel's consent to be present at the ball.

She threw her arms round Marvel's neck and kissed her. To do her justice, she was far more sincerely glad for Marvel's sake than for her own that she had at last consented to come out of her shell. Then a sudden thought struck her and frightened her.

"I hope you will like the people I have asked," she said, "but of course you need not talk to everybody. And I unfortunately gave carte blanche to my sister-in-law, Lady Verulam, to bring anyone she chose; and she is bringing Mrs. Scarlett."

"Yes," said Marvel, and waited, unaware that Mrs. Verulam's steady gaze at her meant anything, and then—"Who is Mrs. Scarlett, and why shouldn't she bring her?"

"The fashionable beauty, even now, though a year has elapsed since she first dawned upon an appreciative London audience—and a wretch!" said Mrs. Verulam, quite carried away by such a pattering as honest feeling, as she looked at Marvel's gentle, spiritual face.

The fiddlers had tuned their instruments to the correct pitch, and were playing away valiantly; the rooms were growing every moment more and more crowded. Through all the open windows came the sweet perfume of the living flowers without to mingle with that of the drying ones within; and through the close, velvety darkness one's eyes pierced to where starlike lights hung suspended on tree and shrub.

The lord lieutenant of the county, who was a real, live duke and a bachelor too—though an old one—had arrived half an hour back, yet still the house party—more particularly Lady Lucy Verulam openly and Mrs. Scarlett secretly—were on the very tiptoe of expectation.

Marvel entered the room—a tall, slender, stately creature, clad all in purest white, with diamonds glittering on neck and arms, and gleaming warmly among the soft masses of her lovely hair. Mrs. Verulam stood beside her, and together they advanced up the room, stopping now and again as the former paused to introduce Lady Wriothsey to one or two people of importance.

Marvel was looking intensely lovely, and showed the terrible nervousness that was consuming her only by the increasing pallor that marked her face. She was drawing near the corner where Mrs. Scarlett sat, and a little hush had fallen upon the people there. Mrs. Scarlett herself was leaning forward, forgetful of everything but her anxiety to get a nearer view of the girl of whose face she had caught a faint glimpse between the moving forms of the dancers. Then there was a moment when she stood clearly revealed; and Mrs. Scarlett, as she saw her, grew curiously still, her breath coming from her like a long-drawn sigh.

Some awful fascination kept her eyes fixed on Marvel, and then—what was it? Was she going to faint? She averted a little and then recovered herself with a sharp effort. That lovely face over there—what other face did it resemble? What horrible thing was this that rose before her and cried aloud, "At last, at last!" in tones that would not be stifled? Was all this madness, or what?

She leaned further forward and positively glared at the girl, standing pale and tranquil and unconscious, until one near her remarked the intensity of her gaze, and lightly touched her on the arm with a lighter jest; she recovered herself then, but her face remained pallid as the dead. Thus, fair and tranquil, had that figure stood out from the surrounding darkness in her dream. It all came back to her now, and with it a strange sense that fate was crushing down upon her which seemed to paralyze her limbs. She made a vehement struggle to overcome her emotion, and after awhile succeeded; but the weary pain in her side which was beginning to torment her day and night grew stronger because of this effort, and she leaned languidly back in her chair, hardly deigning to answer those who spoke to her.

Marvel unconsciously was creating a sensation. Her strange, romantic wedding was of course town talk, and now everybody more or less was discussing her merits and demerits. So this was the little waif, the stray that Wriothsey had married! No one knew who she was—a mere nobody—nay, in all probability, worse than a nobody. Of course, that sort of thing never did. Here was she, now, irretrievably bound to him; but where was he? It was one of the most unfortunate things that had happened to a young man of position for a very long time. All this from the women; the men were more lenient. They could see and acknowledge that all over her she was unspeakably beautiful, and allowed there was every excuse for even so rash a marriage; but how account for his long absence? That puzzled them even more than the women, who were not so willing to admit her charms.

(To be continued.)

An African Poison Story.

Charles M. Stern, of Chicago, who has just returned to this city after a journey through Northeast Africa, told of a curious meteorological phenomenon which he observed in a district called Gwallah. "The vegetation in that region is very luxuriant," said he, "and the plant life must give off an unusually large quantity of carbonic acid gas. At least that was the conclusion I reached after seeing three natives die and four or five dogs."

"The moment the animals put their noses close to the ground they would fall over and gasp, and die in about five minutes. The natives who died slept on the ground instead of in hammocks, as others did. I saw hundreds of dead birds. My theory is that a stratum of the deadly gas covered the ground for a depth of three or four inches, and any living thing breathing in that area would be asphyxiated."

"I could not understand, however, how the gas was not distributed in a thinner layer, and what kept it in one place for a whole day. Nothing like it had ever been known there before. The deaths of the men and dogs all occurred within twenty-four hours. Then the gas, if it was really gas, seemed to dissipate. It was a very strange occurrence and I might have been induced to make a more exhaustive investigation if my presence had not excited distrust. I got away as quickly as possible, rather than be accused of being the cause of the sudden deaths. The natives are superstitious and attribute most of their misfortunes to witchcraft, so I thought it the part of wisdom to get away."—New York Mail and Express.

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